

**Coming to Terms with a Tragedy: A
Psychoanalytic Approach to Lindsay-
Abaire's *The Rabbit Hole* and *Harling's Steel
Magnolias***

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis is one of the most important literary theories in the field of literary studies, today. The renowned Austrian psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud was the founder of this movement. Freud's ideas about the division of the human psyche, and his employment of characters from literary works to demonstrate the deviations in human behavior set the bases for this critical approach. However, the theory did not stop there, and many ideas of other modern psychiatrists added to the development of the theory. The trauma theory and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are one of the major branches of psychoanalysis. The purpose of this paper is to apply Glenn R. Schiraldi's concepts about trauma and PTSD to Lindsay-Abaire's Pulitzer-winning play *The Rabbit Hole* (2006), and Robert Harling's play, *Steel Magnolias* (1988). The paper tries to analyze the symptoms of PTSD and the defense mechanism the characters employ to overcome a traumatic event. People are different and they differ in their ways to cope with tragedy. Even though the characters in both dramas display similar symptoms of PTSD, they are different in their methods of overcoming it.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, PTSD, Schiraldi, *Rabbit Hole*, *Steel Magnolias*.

ملخص

يعتبر التحليل النفسي من أهم النظريات الأدبية في مجال الدراسات الأدبية اليوم. و يعتبر الطبيب النفسي النمساوي الشهير سيغموند فرويد مؤسس هذه الحركة. وضعت أفكار فرويد حول تقسيم النفس البشرية ، وتوظيفه لشخصيات من الأعمال الأدبية لإثبات الانحرافات في السلوك البشري ، أسس هذا النهج النقدي. ومع ذلك ، لم تتوقف النظرية عند هذا الحد ، وقد أضافت العديد من أفكار الأطباء النفسيين المعاصرين الآخرين إلى تطوير النظرية. تعد نظرية الصدمة واضطراب ما بعد الصدمة (PTSD) أحد الفروع الرئيسية للتحليل النفسي. الغرض من هذه الورقة البحثية هو تطبيق مفاهيم جلين آر شيرالدي حول الصدمة واضطراب ما بعد الصدمة على مسرحية ليندسي أباير الحائزة على جائزة بوليتزر حفرة الأرنب (2006) ، ومسرحية روبرت هارلينج ، زهور من حديد (1988). تحاول هذه الدراسة البحثية تحليل أعراض اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة وآلية الدفاع التي تستخدمها الشخصيات في المسرحيتين للتغلب على حدث صادم. الناس مختلفون ويختلفون في طرقهم للتعامل مع المأساة. على الرغم من أن الشخصيات، في كلا العملين الدراميين، تُظهر أعراضًا متشابهة لاضطراب ما بعد الصدمة ، إلا أنهم مختلفين في طرق التغلب عليه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية التحليل النفسي ، ، اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة ، شيرالدي ، حفرة الأرنب، زهور من الحديد الصلب.

The psychoanalytic approach to literature is certainly one of the most important literary theories of the 20th century. In his book, *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson states: “Psychoanalytic concepts have become part of our everyday lives; and therefore, psychoanalytic thinking should have the advantage of familiarity” (11). He adds: “Psychoanalytic concepts such as sibling rivalry, inferiority complexes, and defense mechanisms are in such common use that most of us feel we know what they mean without ever having heard them defined” (12). The psychoanalytic approach to literature is mainly employed to help the reader/audience to have a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the actions of the characters in a literary work. The relationship between psychoanalysis and literature has been beneficial for both of them. While psychoanalysis uses literature to explain some complicated psychological concepts, literature, on the other hand, uses psychoanalysis as a way of interpreting the theme, technique, and even the psychological motivations of the author of a literary work.

Psychoanalysis, as a theory, was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the renowned Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud. The whole concept of psychoanalysis is centered on the existence of what is called:

“The Unconscious Mind”, which determines people’s actions, whether intentionally or unintentionally. According to Monte, “Psychoanalytic theories assume the existence of unconscious internal states that motivate an individual’s overt actions” (8). Thus, psychoanalysis aims at understanding the human mind itself and helps in treating it of all its various abnormalities.

There are different definitions of the term Psychoanalytic criticism. Joseph Chandra and Antony Samy give another definition of the literary theory of psychoanalysis. “Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism, which employs some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature.” (Chandra & Samy, 2016, 103). Moreover, they argue that: “literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author’s own neuroses.” (Chandra & Samy, 2016, 103). Another important definition is Mahroof Hossain’s definition: “Psychoanalysis is one of the modern theories that are used in English literature. It is a theory that is regarded as a theory of personality organization and the dynamics of personality that guides psychoanalysis.” (Hossain1). Hossain further explains the importance of Psychoanalysis by saying: “Psychoanalysis has been seen as a form of therapy which aims to cure mental

disorders ‘by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the minds’. Psychoanalysis examines the articulation of our most private anxieties and meanings to culture and gives us a perspective on them as cultural formations.” (Hossain 3). Thus, the Psychoanalysis method of treating mental disorders is a way of examining the connection between the unconscious part of the mind (the uncontrollable part) and the conscious part (the controllable one), and by exploring this relationship and understanding it , the process of healing becomes stronger and more effective .Wake believes that psychoanalysis “since its inception, its influence has extended far beyond clinical practice and has profoundly informed thinking in anti-cultural, philosophy, politics, and society”(66).

Accordingly, Psychoanalytic criticism uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literary works. Tyson in *Using Critical Theory* states:

...Psychoanalytical theory tells us, we all encounter life-events, that shape our psychological development and these early experiences tend to play out in our adult lives. Most of us have experienced, for example, recurring episodes of sibling rivalry, or other kinds of jealousy, of self-doubt, or insecurity, or of loneliness or

isolation. In other words, we all experience some sort of psychological problems over the course of our lives. (81)

Psychoanalytic criticism, in the literary field, has been used as a tool for critically assessing the underlying thematic motivations and backgrounds of character portrayal in its unique form within any literature. In this regard, Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* is a revolutionary classic work and it occupies a very important place, particularly, in psychoanalytical theory and research. In this book, he puts forward his concept of the tripartite psyche – id, ego, and superego and the significance of these three psychic zones in a human being's life and society. His theories and works such as *The Ego and the Id*, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, and *Civilization and Discontent* have heavily influenced the theoretical and professional practice of psychology and literature especially the western culture and people.

According to Freud, the interpretation of a literary text is quite similar to the interpretation of a dream, as he describes literature as an outcome of the unconscious which means to express emotions, that otherwise would get suppressed or die. Similar to the theoretical notions advocated by Freud, "the

psychoanalytical principles assume that all authors are neurotic beings, to whom, writing is a tool to release and gain recognition for their suppressed emotions, desires, fears and wishes in disguise of their created characters” (Etchegoyen 8–10).

Psychoanalysis encompasses many terms that have not been wildly used in approaching literature. Terms like hysteria, defense mechanisms, and trauma have become the part and parcel of the psychoanalytic theory. The word “trauma”, for instance, comes from a Greek origin. It used to mean “wound”, referring to a cut in the body. However, later on, the meaning of the word changed to denote a wound in the soul itself. According to *Webster’s New College Dictionary* of 1995, trauma is “an emotional shock that creates substantial and lasting to the psychological development of the individual, generally leading to neurosis: something that severely jars the mind or emotions” (1173). In modern times, trauma mainly refers to a great shock caused by war atrocities, terrorist attacks, massacres, genocides, earthquakes, hurricanes, domestic violence, child abuse, or the loss of a loved one. The fact that the aftermath of the traumatic event can be more harmful and can cause more damage to the soul, more than the event itself, is what leads to the establishment

of a branch of psychoanalysis that deals with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lately, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has occupied a great portion of the studies on psychoanalysis. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth describes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 57–58). In general, understanding PTSD reflects “the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, physically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control” (Caruth 58).

Another psychoanalyst who is interested in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, its causes, symptoms, and cure, is Glenn R. Schiraldi. Schiraldi is a contemporary psychoanalyst who wrote fourteen books on the topic of PTSD and its management. Schiraldi’s books have been translated into sixteen languages. One of his most influential books is *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook: A Guide to Healing Recovery & Growth (2016)*. This book fully covers, almost, everything about PTSD.

It also helps PTSD patients and their families to have a full understanding of it and how to deal with it. According to Schiraldi, “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) results from exposure to an overwhelming stressful event, such as war, rape, or abuse. It is a normal response by normal people to an abnormal situation” (Schiraldi 3).

Schiraldi believes that the psychological pain, resulting from a traumatic event, is so severe and intense that can break almost any human being. The pain caused by PTSD should not be ignored or undermined. Furthermore, Schiraldi categorizes the causes of PTSD into three divisions. The first category is the trauma caused by intentional human actions. Examples of this category are actions like robbery, rape, and torture. The second category is related to unintentional human actions like car accidents and nuclear disasters. Finally, the third category is related to natural disasters and acts of nature like hurricanes, earthquakes and the sudden death of a loved one. According to Schiraldi, there are a lot of symptoms of PTSD such as: anxiety, dissociation and finally Avoidance and Numbing. He further defines anxiety as: “anxiety is essentially worrisome thoughts plus excessive emotional and physical arousal” (Schiraldi 13). The PTSD patient lives in a state of constant fear and worry. S/he will

always be afraid of the repetition of the traumatic event. Dissociation is one of the most dangerous symptoms of PTSD, since it can lead to great number of mental abnormalities. Dissociation occurs when the traumatic memory separates itself from other memories and creates a space of its own called “Dissociation Traumatic Memory Material” (Schiraldi 15). The dissociated memory will always constitute a source of constant annoyance to the person suffering from PTSD. It will keep causing pain, fear, and anxiety over time, unless it is processed and reintegrated into the normal memory. Additionally, Avoidance and Numbing are other PTSD symptoms. Schiraldi states that:

“People with PTSD syndromes are desperately trying to avoid all the reminders of the trauma. They might refuse to talk about it. They might block from their mind thoughts, images, or feelings about the event. They might avoid activities, places, people, or keepsakes that arouse recollections.” (Schiraldi 20)

People with traumatic memories will always try to run away from these memories to avoid the pain caused by them. While some may turn to drugs and overwork, other people, on the other hand, pretend that the traumatic action never actually occurred; they even live in a fantasy world that never exists. Another type of

trauma survivors goes into a state of complete denial; they completely shut down their feelings and emotions and never talk about the traumatic action.

This paper investigates Glenn R. Schiraldi concepts and ideas about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, especially the one caused by a child loss. The study tries to apply the stages of surviving trauma on two plays: *The Rabbit Hole* by David Lindsay-Abaire (2006), and *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harling (1988).

David Lindsay-Abaire is an American screenwriter, playwright and a lyricist. He was born on 30th of November 1969 in Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America. He earned his first degree in Drama from Sarah Lawrence College in 1992. Lindsay-Abaire is considered one of the most successful American playwrights today. He received unlimited number of prizes and nominations for his plays and musical books. Lindsay-Abaire's play *Good people* (2011) was awarded The Horton Foote Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. Lindsay-Abaire also wrote the lyrics for the famous musical book *Shrek* which was nominated for A Grammy Award. *Rabbit Hole* (2006) is considered by many critics to be one of Lindsay-Abaire 's most important plays. The play was nominated to five

Tony awards including the Best play award, but it won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which is considered one of the most prestigious awards in literature. The play also won the Spirit of America Award, and later on it was adapted in a movie with the same name which was nominated for the Oscar Prize. Lindsay–Abaire also wrote other plays such as: *Fuddy Meers* (1998), *A Devil Inside* (2000), *Kimberly Akimbo* (2000), and *Wonder of the World* (2001).

Rabbit Hole was first published in 2006. The action of the play takes place at the Corbet residence in Larchmont, New York. The events of the play are in the present time. The play tells the story of the Corbets, Becca and Howie who are all suffering from post–traumatic stress disorder after the tragic death of their son, Danny. Danny was their only child, a four–year– old boy, hit by a car while chasing his dog, Taz. The events of the play start eight months after this tragic accident. The play has five on–stage characters: Becca, Howie, Nat, Izzy, and Jason. The *Rabbit Hole* demonstrates the grieving process and how each character is trying to overcome the post–traumatic stress disorder, resulting from Danny’s loss.

Even though death is the natural end of any human being, many people cannot actually face it. According to Schiraldi,

The natural death of a loved one is one of the most traumatic experiences a person can face. It completely alters their personality. Every human being deals with the loss of a loved one in their own way, some of them try to run away from their memories with those loved ones, others hold on tight to those thoughts. Some people move on and continue their lives normally, while others get stuck in their traumatic experience.

(22)

Becca Corbit, the protagonist of the play, is a housewife in her early forties. She is the wife of Howie and the mother of Danny. Becca is the most traumatized character in the play. The sudden loss of her only child changed Becca's attitude towards life, completely. Becca was once a happy mother, a great friend, a good wife, a loving sister, and a religious person who attends Sunday masses regularly at the church. Now, after the loss of Danny, she turned into an unhappy, judgmental, selfish, offensive, and an atheist person, who no longer believes in God.

Nat: I don't know why you don't believe in God anyway. I brought you to church every Sunday. You used to believe in God.

Becca: Well I don't anymore.

Nat: Well, you should. What if you're wrong? What if there is a God?

Becca: Then I would say he's a sadistic prick. (55)

All through the play, the character of Becca suffers from a state of anxiety, represented by the excessive emotional arousal that she feels towards some normal situations. The incident, during which she punches a woman at the supermarket, is a great example of her anxiety. Becca encounters a woman and her child at the supermarket. The boy cries loudly and wants his mother to buy him some sweets. The mother refuses and the boy continues crying hysterically. Becca tries to intervene, telling the mother not to disappoint her child, and appreciate what she is got. The woman tells her that she should mind her own business. Suddenly, Becca loses her tempers and hits the woman in the face. Anxiety also affects the relationship between Becca and her sister, Izzy. When Becca knows about Izzy's pregnancy, she becomes offensive and starts accusing her with negligence and irresponsibility. She even wonders whether Izzy is going to keep the baby or give it for adoption.

Avoidance and Numbing are other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Right from the beginning of the play, Becca tries to erase anything that reminds her of Danny. She

believes that this is the only way to lighten this amount of grief over the loss of Danny. She tries to stay away from Danny's memories, as much as possible. Becca donates Danny's clothes for charity, Becca hides his pictures and art books, and she collects in boxes his paintings that used to be there on the refrigerator. She sends Danny's dog, Taz, to her mother's house. Becca even asks Howie to sell their house and move out to a new city. She wants to meet new people and have new neighbors, with no pity looks in their eyes. One day, Howie tried to play an old video tape of Danny, only to find out that the tape's contents have been replaced by a TV program. Howie accuses Becca of destroying the content on purpose and they get into a huge fight. At the end of the fight, Becca confesses that she realizes that getting rid of Danny's stuff will never solve anything. No matter what she does, she can never erase Danny's memories, and she does not want to. She just cannot handle staying around his memories, right now.

HOWIE: I don't talk about the tape. Not just the tape.

BEECA: And the paintings are downstairs. In a box.

You can look at them whenever you want.

HOWIE: The clothes. His shoes.

BECCA: We don't need all that stuff. Why would we keep---?

HOWIE: Your wanting to sell the house.

BECCA: We already talked about it.

HOWIE: Taz. Sending Taz to your mother's!

BECCA: There was a lot going on, Howie. We couldn't deal with the dog.

HOWIE: I was fine with the dog. I was the one walking him.

BECCA: well, he got underfoot.

HOWIE: And he was a reminder.

BECCA: Yes, he was a reminder. So what? I wanted one less reminder around here. That's perfectly normal. Oh for god sakes. (1.4.62-63)

Howie, on the other hand, exhibits another symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder: dissociation. Howie mentally disconnects himself from the trauma of losing his only son. Howie continues to live as if nothing has happened. He wants to see everything related to Danny in its place. He wants to find Danny's clothes and shoes where they are supposed to be. He wants to see his paintings on the refrigerator. He goes on waking Danny's dog and goes to work every single day as if nothing has

happened. Unlike Becca, he does not want to donate Danny's things to charity. Howie lives in a state of denial. For him, giving away Danny's things is like confessing his death. Admitting the loss of his only child is something that he cannot handle, consciously. Therefore, unconsciously, he keeps on living his life, the way he used to do before the accidents. He wants to have a romantic relationship with Becca and is even dating another woman in New York.

Unlike Becca and Howie, Nat, the mother of Becca, represents another way of coping with the trauma of child loss. Thirteen years ago, Nat lost her son Arthur. Arthur was a thirty-year-old heroin addict who put an end to his own life by hanging himself. With the aim of overcoming her grief, Nat attended support groups. Nat believes that opening up to people who went through the same traumatic event really helps in recovery. Support groups strengthened her trust in God and made her a regular church-goer. Being a trauma survivor herself, Nat wants to give a hand to her daughter and supports her get through this ordeal. First, Nat wants to draw the attention of her daughter to the fact that acceptance is the key to surviving the death trauma. During Izzy's birthday party, Nat tells a story about Aristotle Onassis. Onassis could not accept that the death of his only son

in a plane crash was just an accident. He reached the point of offering a prize for anyone who can prove that his son's plane was sabotaged. Later on, Onassis died out of grief over the loss of his son. Nat tells this story to indirectly convey to her daughter that she should accept what happened. However, Becca felt offended. She feels that her mother is intervening in her personal life and the way she is mourning the passing of her son.

BECCA: Then why are you telling this story?

NAT: I am just talking. I can't talk?

BECCA: You never just talk. It sounds like you're just talking, but it's always so much more, isn't it?

(1.2.20)

Later on, the argument between Becca and her mother escalates. Nat wants to give her daughter advice on how to deal with grief. However, Becca becomes furious when her mother starts comparing her situation to Becca's.

BECCA: You Know what I wish? I wish you would stop comparing Danny to Arthur! Danny was a four-year old boy who chased his dog into the street! Arthur was a thirty-year-old heroin addict who hung himself!

Frankly I resent how you keep lumping them together

(Silence) NAT: He was still my son.

BECCA: And I don't recall anyone giving you instructions on how best to grieve for him. (2.2.94)

Later on in the play, Becca starts to change her attitude towards her mother. While Becca and Nat were arranging over Danny's stuff, Nat mentions Arthur, and then she regrets this. She thinks that this would irritate Becca. However, contrary to her expectations, Becca says that it is okay to mention him because after all, he was her brother. Becca even wants to learn from the experience of her mother, signifying that she is on the right way of curing from the trauma. She asks her:

BECCA: This feeling, Does it ever go away?

Nat: No, I don't think it does. Not for me it has'nt

And that's going on eleven years. It changes though

BECCA: How?

NAT: I do not know. The weight of it, I guess. At some point it becomes bearable. (2.2.98)

At the end of the play, Becca realizes that her mother's dealing with grief is the best way. So as to deal probably with a tragedy you have to accept it. Acceptance is the first step on the road of surviving a trauma.

Izzy and Jason represent other different ways of coping with a traumatic event. Izzy, Becca sister, was very close to her nephew, Danny. She used to play and paint with him. Danny's sudden accidental death was also traumatic to Izzy. However, Izzy chose to fight death with life. She enters a new relationship. She gets pregnant and is so excited about it and intends to keep the baby. She has a birthday party and a baby shower. She insists on living the experience of being a new mother in its full detail. Sometimes Becca doubts her grief over Danny's death, but she assures her that she is recovering from the impact of Danny's traumatic death.

IZZY: I wasn't using him as an excuse. I was just saying that it's been hard to pull it together, that's all. For all of us.

BECCA: Don't do that

IZZY: Hey, I'm still coping too, Becca. I know it's not the Same, but it is still hard. Okay? (1.1.10)

Jason is the seventeen-year-old teenager who hit Danny with his car. Jason blames himself for speeding up with his car. He lives with the feeling of regrets and sorrow. However, Jason fights this trauma with writing fictional stories to the school magazine. He dedicates one of his stories to Danny. In this story, her portrays a rabbit hole that would make any person live in a

parallel universe. This parallel world is a place in which one can find another version of him or of her, leading a happy life. The universe is full of infinite potentialities and possibilities. One of these possibilities is the possibility that one day; it might be our turn to lead a happy life.

“Jason: Yeah, because infinite space means...it means it goes on and on forever, so there’s a never–ending stream of possibilities” (2.3.110). The title of the play, itself, is taken from Lewis Carroll’s famous novel: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). In this novel, the protagonist, Alice chases a white rabbit into a deep hole in the ground. Going down this rabbit hole introduces Alice into a new world and new characters, she has never met before. It symbolizes the infinite possibilities and potentialities that still exist. The conversation with Becca and the dream of having another version of her leading a happy life is what changes Becca’s perspective. Becca decides to have hope and to cope with her loss by trying to lead a normal life.

Robert Harling was born in the southern state of Louisiana, at the United States of America, in the year, 1951. Harling studied law at Tulane University’s Law School. Soon after graduation, Harling decided to quit law and follow his passion for acting and playwriting. In 1978, Harling moved out to New York to pursue a

career in writing dramas and acting. Harling wrote plays for the screen such as *Soadish* (1991), *The First Wives Club* (1996), *The Evening Star* (1996), and *Law of Attraction* (2004). However, his masterpiece ever is his play *Steel Magnolias* (1988).

Steel Magnolias (1988), as a play, was its playwright's reaction and way of surviving a traumatic event. In the year 1987, Robert Harling's sister, Suzan Harling Robertson, died of diabetic complications after giving birth. Ever since her childhood, Suzan suffered from type I diabetes. This constituted a psychological burden on all the members of her family. After giving birth to her child, Robert, Suzan went into a coma, resulting from diabetes. Eventually, she developed renal failure, and finally succumbed to death. Suzan's death was devastating to all the members of her family, especially, her brother, Robert. Robert Harling locked himself up in his room for ten days. Then he came out with his masterpiece, *Steel Magnolias*. Writing this play was Harling's way of documenting his sister's suffering. Additionally, it was also his method of paying to the sweet memory of his beloved sister.

The setting of the play is a beauty salon in a small town in Louisiana, south of the United States of America. The action of the play takes place during the period of two years, from 1983 to 1985. Act I takes place in the year 1983, while the actions of Act

It takes place in 1985. The play tells the story of six southern women meeting on regular bases in a beauty shop. They talk about their ordeals in life, and how they are coping with their calamities. Most of the events of the play are off-stage actions. The audience/reader knows about them from the narratives of the six female characters.

Unlike Beeca, who faces the sudden traumatic event of the loss of her child, M'Lynn (Mary Lynn) deals with the gradual death of her daughter, Shelby, all through the play. M'Lynn is a career woman in her late forties. She is the administrator of the town's Mental Guidance Centre. She is the mother of three children: two sons and a daughter, Shelby. Shelby is the prettiest girl in town. Shelby has been suffering from juvenile diabetes since her childhood. Ever since Shelby had been diagnosed with the disease, M'Lynn has been trying to cope with this tragedy. M'Lynn suffers from the symptoms of PTSD. She lives in a state of anxiety. She is in a constant state of worrying about her daughter. In Act I, Scene I in the play, M'Lynn worries that her daughter might have a hypoglycemic coma. She always keeps candies in her purse. After the marriage of Shelby, M'Lynn lives in a state of anxiety, and worry. She fears that her daughter might get pregnant. M'Lynn was with Shelby when the doctors warned

her not to get pregnant, due to her medical history. “SHELBY: Mama. I know. I know. Don’t think I haven’t thought this thought. You can’t live a life if all you do is worry. And you worry too much. I never worry because I know you’re worrying enough for the both of us” (Act I, Scene II, 55).

When Shelby’s medical condition deteriorates; her kidneys fail and she is being put on the dialysis machine, M’Lynn lives in a state of complete anxiety. She is afraid to lose her daughter. M’Lynn goes on to the extent of donating her own kidney to her daughter. Unfortunately, the transplant fails and Shelby eventually dies. M’Lynn was the only one with Shelby in the room when they switched off the life–support machines. She was there holding her hand.

M’LYNN: But finally we all realized there was no hope.

At that point I panicked. I was very afraid that I would not survive the next few minutes while they turned off the machines. Drum could not take it. He left. Jackson could not take it. He left. It struck me as amusing. Men are supposed to be made of steel or something. But I could not leave. I just sat there...holding Shelby’s hand while the Sounds got softer and the beeps got farther apart

until all was quiet. There was no noise, no tremble
Just peace. I realized as a woman how lucky I was.
I was there when this wonderful person drifted into
my world and I was there when she drifted out

(Act I, Scene II, 106)

Even after Shelby' death, M'Lynn is still in a state of worry. She is concerned that Shelby's son, Robert, will never meet his mother. He will never appreciate the amount of sacrifice; she went through in order to bring him to this world.

M'LYNN: Yes, yes, I feel fine. I feel great. I could jog to Texas and back, but my daughter can't. She never could
I am so mad I do not know what to do. I want to
Know why Shelby's life is over. How is that baby
Is going to understand what she went through for
him? I don't understand. Lord, I wish I could. It is
not supposed to happen this way. I am supposed to
go first. I can't stand this. (Act I, Scene II, 108)

Finally, at the end of the play, M'Lynn decides to pull herself together, and not to surrender to the traumatic event of losing her daughter. She goes to the beauty salon and has her hair done. The play ends with her going out of the beauty shop, symbolizing that life goes on no matter what.

“As M’Lynn leaves the shop, she passes Shelby’s radio that has ceased to play during the scene. M’Lynn stops, looks at it lovingly, then hauls off and gives it a mighty whack. It starts playing softly. M’Lynn smiles and tells the Group on her exit...)

M’LYNN: There. That’s better” (Act II, Scene II, 112)

Annelle is another female character in the play. She is one of the southern Steel Magnolias. At the beginning of the play, she is devastated and hesitant after the loss of her husband. However, she soon recovers after working at the beauty salon. Gradually, she becomes strong and independent. She finds solace in going to church and becoming a religious person. Her heart opens up again for love. She falls in love and remarries again. She got pregnant and is expecting her first child. Shelby’s death was a traumatic event that shattered her life. Annelle was close to Shelby. Shelby was the one who introduced her to her second husband, Sammy. However, after the tragic demise of Shelby, Annelle chooses to fight her grief with hope of a better future. She decides to name her future baby, Shelby.

ANNELLE: Oh! Miss M’Lynn. I don’t know if this is the time or the place, but I wanted to tell you that Sammy and I decided if this is a girl, we want to name it Shelby...Since she was the reason we met in the

first place. If you don't mind.

M'LYNN: Mind? Shelby would love that.

That's the way it should be. Life goes on.

(Act II, Scene II, 112)

In this respect, the character of Annelle is like the character of Izzy in *Rabbit Hole*; both of them fight grief with rejoicing the birth of new life.

The other minor characters in the play: Clairee and Quiser also suffer from the death of their husbands, and the fact that they are living alone. Shelby's death was a devastating event and a traumatized one. She represented a daughter-figure for both of them. Her passing away was hard on them. Yet, at the end of the play, they choose to go to the beauty salon and go on with their lives.

After M'Lynn's exit, Clairee takes Quiser's hand in friendship noticing Quiser's need for a manicure. Annelle offers a silent prayer, which Quiser acknowledges, but respectfully does not interrupt. Truvy, who has been watching M'Lynn out the the window, returns to working on Clairee's hair. The action in the shop continues as light fade and the music swells.

(Act II, Scene II, 113)

All the female characters in the play suffer after Shelby's death. However, each one of them has her own way of coping with this tragedy. They prove to be as beautiful and gentle as the flower of the south, the Magnolia. Additionally, they are as strong as steel. Julius Novick is quoted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* as saying: "The Steel in *Steel Magnolias* refers not to metallic rigidity, hardness, and coldness, but to sheer strength of character" (167).

In conclusion, the loss of a loved person is one of the most traumatic events; anyone can face during his lifetime. This tragic loss may cause symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Symptoms like anxiety, dissociation, avoidance, and numbing are the most common. The two protagonists of *Rabbit Hole* and *Steel Magnolias*, along with other characters in the two plays, exhibit some of these symptoms. Although, people are different, and they differ in their ways of surviving a tragedy, all the characters, in the previously mentioned plays, choose to continue with their lives. Finally, they realize that life goes on no matter what.

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